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### What I have done, what was done to me: confession and testimony in stolen life: journey of a cree woman

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## ‘What I have done, what was done to me’: Confession and Testimony in *Stolen Life: Journey of a Cree Woman*

The truth and reality of my life is in the existence I live now, in this prison with this sentence. I won’t be ashamed of what was done to me in my life any more. I accept my faults, I’ve learned to wear my own shame, but I refuse to wear anyone else’s – and I give back to my abusers the shame that is theirs and theirs alone. What I have done, what was done to me, that will never silence me again (Wiebe and Johnson, 23).

Yvonne Johnson’s life narrative, written over a six-year period in collaboration with Rudy Wiebe, tells the story of how Johnson came to be the only First Nations woman in Canada serving a life-twenty-five sentence for first degree murder. *Stolen Life: Journey of a Cree Woman* (1998)<sup>1</sup> relates the circumstances of Johnson’s involvement with three others – Dwayne Wenger, Ernest Jensen and Shirley Anne Salmon – in the killing of Leonard Charles Skwarok in Wetaskiwin, Alberta, in 1989. In a night of excessive drinking, the two men and two women participated in the confinement, beating, sexual abuse, strangulation and killing of Leonard Skwarok, a man they barely knew, but whom they believed to have molested children and who, Johnson feared, was a threat to her own young children. The murder is brutal. Of the four, Johnson is found guilty of first degree murder, while the others received lesser sentences.

As well as this account of her crime, the book also traces Johnson’s recovered narrative of repeated sexual abuse which she recalls being inflicted upon her by family members, acquaintances of family and strangers from the earliest years of her childhood. Born with a cleft palate, as was her grandmother, and as her daughter would be, Johnson was unable to voice her pain or explain what was being done to her. As a child she had “few communicating sounds” (78), and consequently the sexual abuse continued for years. Shame and the associated guilt that victims of abuse feel led her as a teenager into what would become cycles of alcohol abuse. She struggled as well with suicidal urges, and experienced rape repeatedly, including on the night of the killing.

*Stolen Life* is a confronting book and a deeply unsettling reading experience. It shocks in its descriptions of the abuse Johnson has suffered; it also shocks in its accounts of the crime she committed. Testimony and confession appear troublingly proximate in

this text, and the claims each makes upon us provoke conflicted responses.

Understanding these claims and recognising that trauma is involved in both can help readers understand the power of this text and see *Stolen Life* as a spirit bundle, a Cree power object needing to be handled – to be read – with caution, care and respect.<sup>2</sup>

The spirit bundle, or medicine bundle, is a central image in the first letter that Johnson wrote to Wiebe from prison. Johnson is a great-great granddaughter of the Plains Cree chief Big Bear. While in Prison for Women (P4W), in Kingston Ontario, she read Wiebe's 1973 book, *The Temptations of Big Bear* and was impressed by his detailed and extensive knowledge her family's history. In her introductory letter to Wiebe, she relates this history in terms of the legacy of colonial dispossession which followed Big Bear's imprisonment: she mentions the "hell" of Indian school which her mother attended; she writes of her older brother's death in police custody, her mother's involvement with AIM, the American Indian Movement, and the subsequent breakdown of her parents' marriage. "I just hate reality, it's so cruel and unkind. But I hold history responsible for that as well," she writes. "I need to fight, I need to know where I come from and why our race suffers so from the hands of my White brothers" (5). In the final paragraph of her letter, she asks Wiebe for his assistance:

Please help me share what it is you know, and how you got it. How is it you came to know as much as you do? Were you led? What was the force behind you? Who are you? Why did you choose Big Bear to write about? What sparked your interest in this powerful man of long ago? I wish to clear his name and to recover his medicine bundle as I try to find my lost family, and only under our Bear Spirit will it ever be true. We have not guarded it as we should have, and now we have suffered long enough; now is the time to heal and to return to the land and reclaim our rightful place and to meet my family that has been sent all over the four winds. We need to come together as Big Bear wished (Wiebe and Johnson, 1998: 9).

Johnson's emphasis of the medicine bundle must have struck Wiebe with exceptional force. As part of his preparation for the writing of *The Temptations of Big Bear*, Wiebe had travelled to New York City to visit the American Museum of Natural History, where Big Bear's bundle is held in its collections of historical artefacts. In his published account of this visit, Wiebe makes the point that to the Cree the medicine bundle was "not so much *historical* as *sacred*" (Wiebe, 1995: 173). The bundle is a

“spirit gift” (168), whose design came to Big Bear in a vision given by the Great Parent of Bear following a period of fasting and prayer. The bundle signified Big Bear’s relationship with the Bear spirit. It was an object of power that could be opened only with respect for the proper protocols. At all other times it remained wrapped and covered to protect it: to protect its contents from harm and, at the same time, to protect the unprepared from its power.

Following Big Bear’s death, his relations were separated and scattered over several reservations in Western Canada, but his spirit bundle was guarded by family members living on the Battle River Reserve in Saskatchewan. In the 1930s, the bundle passed out of Cree hands when it was acquired by David Mandelbaum, an American anthropologist funded by the American Museum and undertaking PhD research among the Battle River reserves. In an upstairs room in the museum in New York, Wiebe was allowed to handle and to open the sacred bundle. He was aware that he lacked the authority or the knowledge to do so – “I am no proper person,” he writes – yet open it he does. He knows that “[t]he bundle was to be opened only when its core was to be worn either in battle or in ceremonial dance,” but, Wiebe declares, “I do intend to go into battle: against all the variegated and clotted ignorance of myself and my people about our past. Having held his story in my hand” (171).

The equation here between bundle and story is significant, but especially so, I want to argue, in terms of the power and the effects that continue to circulate around the reading of *Stolen Life*. To understand *Stolen Life* as a bundle is to understand the text not only in terms of empowerment – its narrator’s testimony of recovery of identity and restoration of her personal integrity following a lifetime of abuse – but also in terms of the potential for, and perception of, harm. Narratives, like the objects within a spirit bundle, can make medicine and that medicine can be healing but also dangerous. When Yvonne Johnson says, “What I have done, what was done to me, that will never silence me again,” Wiebe replies, “Yes – but it’ll be hard. There are so many people in your life, no story is ever only yours alone” (23-24), to which Johnson responds: “Maybe not *only* my story – but it is *mine*” (24). Both Wiebe and Johnson at this point in their text are referring to the difficulties involved in narrating events of sexual abuse occurring within

a family and the consequences that will follow to each member of that family. The anxieties, however, extend much further than family.

*Stolen Life* was entangled with public anxieties over prison writing even before its publication. In February 1998, Wiebe appeared before the Standing Senate Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs representing seven writers' associations from across Canada to present their concerns regarding Bill C-220 which had passed unanimously and without debate through the Canadian House of Commons the previous November.<sup>3</sup> The bill, similar to the 1982 American 'Son of Sam' Bill, was designed to expropriate copyright, and consequently, financial gain, from writers convicted of crime whose work depicted, portrayed or was in any way based on the circumstances surrounding the crime they had committed. Moreover, it extended from writers convicted of crime to anyone assisting or collaborating with convicted criminals to write an account of their crime. Wiebe, in his presentation, argued that prison writing had a long history of providing a means for prisoners to find their redemption and in doing so, contribute to both literature and society's understanding of "its own frailties and failures." Johnson, addressing the Senate committee through a letter read by Wiebe, reiterated this redemptive function. She wrote:

I am a survivor of numerous types of abuse, both afflicted by myself and by others upon me. I have been silenced by my abuse over the years, however, the process of writing has helped me to break that painful spell. If Bill C-220 were in effect, I would suffer in silence forever, along with other people who might heal through this avenue ('Proceedings,' 1998: para. 38).

As well as the concern for freedom of expression and literary creation, Wiebe pointed out that prison writing has played a significant role in the release of wrongly convicted prisoners. This is not unconnected with *Stolen Life* (although the book was not yet released), as the final chapters build towards an argument that Yvonne Johnson's sentence of first degree murder was a "travesty of justice" (419). The words in the book are attributed to the lawyer appointed to take Johnson's appeal to the Supreme Court, and they echo the opinion of Clayton Ruby, a highly respected criminal lawyer, whose view of the Appeal Court judgement, which preceded the Supreme Court appeal, was that it was "an outrageous miscarriage of justice" (419).

Although Bill C-220 did not pass through the Senate, its support in the Lower House is indicative of the degree of anxiety surrounding writing from prison. H. Bruce Franklin, in *Prison Literature in America* (1989), claims that in the 1980s readers became deeply unsettled with the autobiographies of convicted criminals (xii-xiii). Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith make a similar point when they open the chapter on prison writing in their book *Human Rights and Narrated Lives* (2004) with a recount of Nelson Mandela and Ruben Carter sharing a stage in Melbourne, Australia in 2000 (153-156). Both men wrote prison narratives. Mandela's book *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994) is read globally as an exemplary text of political commitment, as dissident writing and testimony to a lifelong struggle to bring about change in an unjust society. Carter's book *The Sixteenth Round* (1974), which inspired support which generated a campaign for his convictions for murder to be reviewed, resulting, eventually, in his release, is illustrative of prison writing leading to exoneration. Yet Carter's case provokes ambivalence, Schaffer and Smith claim:

For many people, Carter is a former political prisoner of a racist justice system, who has dedicated his life to helping others wrongfully convicted. For others, Carter remains a naively lionized criminal, whose gritty life narrative spoke to leftists, intellectuals, and celebrities only too eager to discredit the American justice system as racist (156).

The "doubled projection" operating upon Carter's case "confuses the roles of victim and perpetrator" (156), Schaffer and Smith argue, a confusion which I believe is pertinent to reader response to Johnson in *Stolen Life* as well.

Upon its publication, *Stolen Life* enjoyed substantial critical acclaim. It won the Edmonton Book Prize, the Saskatchewan Book Award, the Writers' Guild of Alberta Award for non-fiction, and the \$10,000 Viacom Canada Writers' Trust Non-Fiction Award. It was also a finalist for the Governor-General's Award for non-fiction. By far the majority of newspaper coverage and book reviews were laudatory, with both non-Indigenous and First Nations writers praising the book for its "insight to the injustices done to Native people and the overwhelming effects of violence and abuse" (Francis, 2000: 8). Two exceptions to this positive reception appeared in the popular media, and one appeared in the academic journal *Canadian Literature*.<sup>4</sup> Each of these objected, with varying emphases, to the extent to which *Stolen Life* deflected attention away from

Johnson's responsibility for the death of Skwarok. One of the articles also criticised the numerous positive reviews of *Stolen Life* which neglected to mention the name of the victim, or dismissed him as an alleged child molester and it is this aspect of *Stolen Life*, its portrayal of Leonard Skwarok, which has arisen in the media most recently.

In 2007, Wiebe's autobiography, *Of This Earth: A Mennonite Boyhood in the Boreal Forest*, was published, again to critical acclaim, winning the \$25,000 Charles Taylor Prize for non-fiction. As with *Stolen Life*, the vast majority of the press has been favourable. One report, however, carried a quote from Karen Chaboyer, who just prior to Leonard Skwarok's death had been living with Skwarok in a de facto relationship. She claims that the attention Wiebe now receives returns her thoughts to *Stolen Life*, which she says, "makes her skin crawl" (Landry, 2007). Two years previously, Chaboyer with her two daughters and son had attended a hearing circle for Yvonne Johnson at which they presented victim impact statements describing not only how the death of Skwarok has impacted upon their lives, but also "how they felt victimized every time they read her book" ('National Justice Network Update,' 2006: 3). These victim impact statements have been posted on a website titled "In Memory of Leonard Charles Skwarok," and in their statements Chaboyer and her children write of the trauma they experience in relation to the book and, they fear, a movie based on the book, which is reportedly in development.<sup>5</sup> They object to the portrayal of Skwarok in the book, especially as his representation is created only through the words of those who contributed to his death. They object that he is identified as "white," though in fact he, like Johnson, has both European and Cree ancestry. They object to statements that he hated children. They object to descriptions that make him seem threatening, unstable, and lacking connections to family. They do not directly deny the allegations of abuse; in fact, Chaboyer writes that Johnson's descriptions of abuse are powerful precisely because they relate the experiences of so many families. Cree writer, Heather Hodgson, agrees with this assessment of the book's power, saying that "exposing the poison is essential to healing" (156). However, where Johnson has found the chance to heal, Chaboyer objects that her family, through Skwarok's death, has been robbed of that possibility. Clearly, Johnson's narrative of lifelong sexual abuse which culminates in a killing is a narrative of trauma whose victims are multiple.

Trauma permeates the pages of *Stolen Life*. Johnson's understanding of her own trauma began in prison, when for the first time, as she says, she had no access to alcohol, with which for years she had distanced herself from any possible memory of what had happened to her (360). Similar to other victims of trauma, she reports the first emergence of her traumatic memories into language being triggered by a single word. "Is something the matter?" a guard in P4W in 1992 asked her. "You walk around all day like a zombie" (332). Johnson then writes:

It was the name Leon always used on me. And suddenly I just blurted out, "I'm having these terrible – not nightmares... sort of pictures... things about when I was little, that have always been there, somewhere, but more and more, I don't know, I can't stop them" (332).

What Yvonne remembers, and here begins to put in language, are the repeated acts of sexual abuse that her brother Leon committed upon her, the first time at the urging of a male babysitter left to care for the Johnson children when Yvonne was between two and three years old. She was also raped by the babysitter who, as a friend of the family, was often at the house. Leon continued to rape her and she remembers as well being raped by her father, and his father. Her silence from the beginning of her experiences was due to her age and the impairment of her cleft palate, which was only corrected through extensive operations later in life.<sup>6</sup> Her silence was also a sign of her trauma, in which pain and fear and incomprehension were sealed beyond language:

When I was first attacked, I could not speak to be understood, I did not know what happened to me, just pain and scared emotions and thoughts of pain recalled... At that age I had nothing to compare, that act is all I had. You learn something because people tell you the story around it – well, this was not my case. I had no story. I registered what happened to me as pain, hate, bitterness, yelling, crying, mass confusion with no explanation (337).

This is an extract from a thirty page witness statement that Johnson made detailing her memories of sexual abuse, and which Wiebe mentions in interview that she sent him early in their collaboration.<sup>7</sup> The statement was written a few months following the trigger event, cited above: the word "zombie," which Leon used on her, the "on" implying that the violence of the word was felt like a weapon. The statement is a more immediate response, however, to a conversation with Yvonne's sister, Karen, who told



her that Leon had raped her earlier that year, and had beat their other sister Minnie when she told their mother of the rape. This is when Yvonne decides: “I will not let this violence in our family continue any more without a fight. I will speak out loud. I will write it down” (334). And it is only two weeks after writing this witness statement that Rudy Wiebe received that introductory letter from Yvonne, asking for his help.

The trauma to which *Stolen Life* testifies is primarily this: the trauma of chronic sexual abuse that is Yvonne’s experience, but not hers alone, nor that of her family alone. When Yvonne spoke to the prison guard about the images that were plaguing her, the guard, a Native woman, shed tears as she replied, “I was raped and molested when I was a baby. My siblings, when they were older, they confirmed it. It happens, yes” (332). Yvonne later writes: “In prison most women understand my story; it’s so much their own” (338). Wiebe, in interview, has said that on the book tour a Native woman in Winnipeg told him that

every single Native woman that she knew had a story of some kind of vicious abuse in her life. If it wasn’t happening now with her husband, it had happened in her past, either from acquaintances, or on the Reserve, in her family with her uncles, her cousins, her brothers, her father, whoever. This is horrible. Every Native woman she knew ... and she must have known hundreds.

Like so many other testimonial texts, the principal narrator’s story is offered as representative of many, as standing in for all those who cannot, due to circumstance, due to trauma, speak for themselves. *Stolen Life*’s accomplishment, achieved by both Wiebe and Johnson, is that of providing language, providing a narrative, where language and narrative – public language, public narrative – did not exist before.

In her essay “Language as Skin,” Ann Scott emphasises the power of language with relation to trauma. “Sexual abuse and the memories associated with it concern a breach in the membrane of the body,” she writes, “and I am suggesting that there is a close relationship between words and sentences, or sentence fragments, and the subject’s sense of bodily integrity, especially the integrity of the skin, the body’s container” (72). Just as memories of traumatic experiences can be triggered by a word, so words can heal and Scott draws the analogy of skin closing over a wound. “[L]anguage again does the work of a skin, or attempts to do the work of a skin, seeking both to patch and to heal the

memory of that trauma” (71). The process, though, Scott argues is one marked throughout by anxiety and volatility. There is no certain outcome, and in cases where perpetrators and victims are brought into contact, or where the language of one impinges upon the other, “words can do the opposite of repair holes in the skin. Rather than provide closure, they can act as a disruptive force” (72).

Healing, Johnson says, should not take place in a courtroom (360). In the trials which follow from sexual assault charges pressed against Leon by Karen and then by Yvonne, and by their cousin Darlene, the Johnson family’s pain, conflict and injury are on public display. Wiebe, who is present at the trials, provides much of the narration, incorporating trial transcripts with his own accounts, including the dialogue that follows his meeting Yvonne’s mother, Cecilia. “Most documented accounts of exchanges between family members where memories were contested show how angry the sequences were” (75), Scott writes, in a discussion of the volatility of language surrounding trauma. Wiebe’s account of the events of the trials certainly makes the reader aware of this anger, not an insubstantial amount of which is directed from Cecilia to him, Wiebe, “the enemy” (348). Outside the court, Wiebe records her as saying, “You write anything about our family [...] you’ll answer to me” (349). Wiebe says nothing at this point, but later that day he tells her, “Yvonne’s life story is her own. No one, not even you, can forbid her to tell it the way she remembers and knows it to be” (349). The remarks rephrase the exchange that took place between Yvonne and Wiebe at the beginning of the book, and cited earlier in this essay, when Wiebe said to her, “no story is ever yours alone,” and Yvonne replied, “Maybe not *only* mine, but it is *mine*” (24). This is at the crux of the anxieties that exist both within the pages of *Stolen Life* and outside of them. No one’s story is ever one’s alone. Every story is a matter both of “what I have done, and what was done to me.” Wiebe signals the importance of this from the opening sentence of his “Prefatory Note” to *Stolen Life*:

This book is based on what Yvonne Johnson holds to be her own truths about the life she has lived. However, since there is never only one way to tell a story, other persons involved in this one may well have experienced and remembered differently the events and actions here portrayed (xi).

Wiebe's opening statement indicates the unavoidability of multiple perspectives, conflicting recall, and relative truths. "What I have done, what was done to me," however, signals more than this. It points towards the overlay of testimony and confession, or perhaps towards their conflation.

The distinction between testimony and confession is a seemingly straightforward matter. Testimony comprises a set of statements given by a witness to events. It is offered as evidence, as proof or substantiation that something has occurred. On the one hand, it necessarily implies, as Andrea Frisch points out, "first hand experiential knowledge" (36). Frisch cites Derrida's claim to this effect:

In essence, a testimony is always autobiographical: it tells, in the first person, the shareable and unshareable secret of what happened to me, to me, to me alone, the absolute secret of what I was in a position to live, see, hear, touch, sense, feel (38).

On the other hand, testimony also implies an event that has made necessary the testimony: someone or something that has acted or impinged upon that subject's being and perceptions. "Witness testimony's object," Susannah Radstone writes, "is always an event or an other that is external to the witness" (169). In contradistinction, confession while also necessarily involving "first hand experiential knowledge," turns upon not "what happened to me," but rather, "what I have done." As Radstone explains, "in confession it is the self that is scrutinised and implicated – the self that is the subject and object of confession" (169). In its religious context, confession is a statement of transgression; in the judicial sense, it is an admission of wrong-doing or of guilt. In both cases, however, the objective of confession is redemption, a restoration of self or person to a spiritual or social order.

Johnson has written, as cited earlier in this essay, that she feels her testimony of sexual abuse to be redemptive. Wiebe knows that for Johnson's story to completely achieve this redemptive end, she must also confess, in her own words, what happened in the basement of her house in Wetaskiwin on the night that Leonard Skwarok was killed. Johnson had made no formal statement to this effect since her arrest. She had not given evidence at her trial. Unlike the other three people involved in the killing, Johnson would in no way explain what she had done that night. In the years following, she talked and

wrote of the events up to the hour of the killing, but would not go further. Wiebe tells us that he wanted her to provide more:

I wanted to hear Yvonne's personal account of what went on. Especially, I wanted to hear, from her, what she knew she had done. And in her written comments on the trial, in her letters, in our conversations, she did explain things – but never in sequence; never as one connected story. For several years she could not find it within herself to do that (279).

Finally, in 1996, at the Okima Ohci Healing Lodge, following a ceremonial sweat, under the guidance of First Nations Elders, and in the presence of one of these Elders, Johnson narrates what she did. She begins:

I do this in a ceremonial way, and it is covered under the medicine, and I believe the spirits are here to help me. My sole purpose in doing this is to give it to the Creator, to give it to the spirits in the hope to get some sort of understanding, to put some sort of closure to all of it (396).

For the next several hours she speaks, to the Creator, to the Elder present, but also to a tape-recorder, explaining what she did and how she contributed to the killing of Leonard Skwarok. Later, she will give this tape to Wiebe, who will transcribe it, and select excerpts to be incorporated into the penultimate chapter of their book.<sup>8</sup>

The redemptive or transformational characteristic of confession in literature establishes a quality of “becomingness” (Radstone, 2006: 171), and this is a critically important feature in the final two chapters of *Stolen Life*. Johnson's confession has only become possible through her engagement with First Nations spirituality, a process of becoming that has been traced throughout the course of the narrative but which culminates in her receiving her spiritual name and in her recovered memories of Cree ceremonies that her grandmother had performed on her as a child.

A crucial point in this process of becoming occurs when Johnson is held at North Battleford jail to await her court appearance to give evidence at Leon's trial from sexual assault. Battleford is near the Red Pheasant Reserve, where Johnson's mother and her branch of the Bear family have lived for four generations. In the small cell where Johnson is held, she reads the names of her relatives;

Their names are everywhere, scratched, cut deep into the bunks, the yellow walls. Relatives I recognize from storytelling, or a chance meeting, family friends whom I may have met once on Red Pheasant. [...] I've never lived

much on the rez, so I'm not well known there. And for years, when my family told a story about a person, I wouldn't know them, but I always thought that some day I would get to know my relations. But sitting here I realize I never will know all my relations. This is a loss I suffer in prison, a loss which can't be healed (368).

The phrasing here is significant. Non-Indigenous readers might recognise the expression 'all my relations' from the title of an anthology of First Nations writing, edited by Thomas King, but might not recognise its implications. 'All my relations' is a spiritual utterance, acknowledging a speaker's relatedness, not just to family, or clan, or even nation, but to all peoples and all living beings that share this existence. It is a powerful utterance, one that is not made lightly.<sup>9</sup> Johnson expresses regret that in her life she has not had sustained connections with family, and that in prison now, she is cut off from family, even as she reads their names cut into the walls of her cell. Yet already in P4W in Kingston she had begun to connect with 'all her relations' when she joined and then became chairperson for the Native Sisterhood, an organisation of First Nations imprisoned women. This is an organisation that had negotiated with the Correctional Service of Canada to allow Elders to visit First Nations women prisoners, arranged for a sweat lodge to be built in P4W, and for ceremonies to be performed.

Over the years of Johnson's writing with Wiebe, her connections and involvement with First Nations spiritual tradition grow. It is during a sweat ceremony at P4W that an Elder triggers childhood memories that will prove crucial in her recovered narrative when he bestows on her the same spiritual name she had been given by her grandmother Flora Baptiste Bear. As he says her name, she writes later in her journal,

I hear the Cree words again. Not from him; it is the voice of my grandmother Flora Bear who speaks my spirit name to me. As I remember she did so often when I was a child:

*Muskeke Muskwa Iskwew.*

Without knowing that name again I could never try to help myself, or help my family. My spirit name, given me by the Spirit World People, now I have a place. Where I can stand to speak.

*Medicine Bear Woman* (331-332).

Hearing her spiritual name again brings back memories of Cree ceremony that her grandmother had performed on her as a child. She begins to remember a visit to the Red

Pheasant reserve where her grandmother led her through Cree ceremonies that would protect her and help her to forget the pain inflicted upon her by others. In the final chapter of her book, Johnson recounts these ceremonies: a shaking tent ceremony to perform release from bondage and suffering, a symbolic flaying with bear claws to induce purification, and a ceremony in which Johnson received from her grandmother her spiritual name: *Muskeke Muskwa Iskwew*: Medicine Bear Woman. These narratives of healing are recovered over the course of more than four years as Johnson writes in her journals, receives counselling from Elders who visit her in prison, and works with Wiebe to retrace her past. Importantly, the Cree traditions that help her rebuild her life narrative also give her the strength to speak directly of what she has done, as she says at the beginning of her taped narrative of what happened in the basement: “it’s time for me to be as a medicine bear woman and to deal with these things” (396).

For most readers, this process of Yvonne Johnson becoming Medicine Bear Woman is a powerful close to the journey through testimony and confession. I need to return, however, to those readers for whom the confession, especially, produces severe disruption rather than an understanding of the redemptive turn it is meant to invoke: I refer once more to the family of Leonard Skwarok and in this regard Scott’s discussion of trauma and language is again insightful. Scott ends her article by referring to Gitta Sereny’s book *Cries Unheard*, published in Great Britain the same year that *Stolen Life* was published in Canada. The book tells the story of Mary Bell, who, thirty years before in 1968, as an eleven year old, killed two younger boys. The author, Sereney, at that time was an investigative journalist and wrote a book about the trial. In 1996 she began to work with Bell on the story of her life, which involved sexual abuse by friends of her mother before the killings and extensive sexual abuse in the secure facilities to which she was sent after being convicted. Scott cites interviews with the mothers of the murdered children, and comments on their intense distress upon learning of the book. Scott sees this as an example of a book, in one particular context, acting “as a toxic object” (81), something so dangerous to the families of the deceased children that it threatened the very stability of their memories of their loved ones (81). This extreme case does bear resemblance to the reactions of the Chaboyer family who in their Victim Impact

Statements write of the pain and trauma they experienced at having to relive their grief when the *Stolen Life* was published, nine years after Skwarok's killing.

There is no question that *Stolen Life* is powerful; also without question, to some the book poses a threat to their own narratives and memories, and this brings my discussion back to the image of the spirit bundle. When I spoke to Yvonne Johnson at the Edmonton Institute for Women, she drew my attention to the design of the book, the way in which her narrative is surrounded, covered, and, in effect, protected by protocols. The book opens with a prayer:

O Creator of all, I pray you, look at me, for I am weak and pitiful.  
 I pray,  
 help me to make amends to all those I have harmed;  
 grant them love and peace, so that they may understand I am sorry;  
 help me share my shame and pain, so that others  
 will do the same, and so awaken to themselves  
 and to all peoples of the world.  
 Hai hai

It is signed (in typescript) Yvonne Johnson, and accompanied by a small image of a bear, a sign of the bear spirit that guides her. Another prayer closes the book, again accompanied by the image of the bear. Johnson, in interview, explains that the prayers are important in Cree ceremony, marking the beginning and end of a protected space. The cover of the book performs a similar function of protection. She describes the cover of *Stolen Life* as representing the coverings that wrap and protect the medicines inside a spirit bundle. She describes how the inclusion of her spiritual colours and their display in the four directions seal the book. She explains that the use of the photographs – of herself as a young girl in the centre of the front cover, and of Big Bear on the back cover – signify the importance of the generations: of heritage and lineage, but also of responsibility and duty of care to all ones relations. Although she does not explicitly refer to the tradition of seven generations, Cree readers can make this connection. Johnson's use of pronouns in the interview indicates that the choice of photographs was not hers ("On the front they have me as a child. On the back they have my great-great-grandfather") but she does claim that she was consulted, and that the choices are

appropriate to the way she understands the book as a spirit bundle, a ceremonial object passed down through generations, a bundle that holds power within its covers.<sup>10</sup>

Narratives of trauma, like the powers within a spirit bundle, are volatile. Johnson emphasises the need to protect that which lies within the bundle: stories which are hers, but not hers alone; stories of what she has done, and of what was done to her. Wrapping a medicine bundle serves to protect the contents. The ceremonies and covering, too, may serve to contain the power, to hold it in, so that others are not exposed, without care, to its medicine. I know, of course, that in significant ways a book cannot be a bundle. Its public circulation conflicts with the possibilities suggested above. Anyone can open a book, at any time, with or without ceremony. But in thinking of *Stolen Life*, and the life narratives it relates, and relates to, treating it as spirit bundle may be a proper form of respect for the power it holds. To open a bundle is to be willing to hold another's story in one's hands, and to hold another's story is to open oneself to its power.



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<sup>1</sup> *Stolen Life: Journey of a Cree Woman* was first published by A.A. Knopf Canada in 1998. The 1999 edition published by Vintage incorporates all the design features requested by Yvonne Johnson. All references in this essay are based on the 1999 edition.

<sup>2</sup> It is with respect that I begin to write about this book. Five years ago I had the opportunity to meet with both Yvonne Johnson and Rudy Wiebe. Although many aspects of this present article are not directly related to our conversations then but have resulted from my reading and writing since, the crucial assertion that *Stolen Life* be approached as a spirit bundle comes directly from Yvonne Johnson, and her view was supported by Rudy Wiebe in our interview the following day. While my article here focuses less on concerns of collaboration than issues of representing trauma through testimony and confession, I remain indebted to the co-authors. I thank them for patiently answering my questions regarding their collaboration, their intentions and aspirations, and their reflections on the book they produced together.

If, for this article, I have chosen not to dwell on the dynamics of collaborative writing – in this case a collaboration inflected by gender as well as race – it is not because the issue is secondary. Instead, I wish to

indicate here how critical reading can also be collaborative. I would not have fully understood the book as spirit bundle without having spoken to Yvonne Johnson and my reading is, I hope, an attempt to apply her metaphor to issues as significant as the book's collaborative construction.

I also thank the participants of the Lifewriting seminar series, held by the Identity and Cultural Transformations research group at Wollongong University for their productive responses to an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Manina Jones closes her discussion of *Stolen Life* and collaboration in postcolonial writing with reference to Bill C220. In addition to Wiebe and Johnson's statements to the Senate Committee, Jones paraphrases Wendy Lill's observation that "given the disproportionate number of Indigenous people and other racial minorities who currently populate Canadian prisons, this legislation [...] might well have racist implications" (2003: 219).

<sup>4</sup> I refer here to the article by Davis Sheremata in the *Alberta Report*, Bert Archer's review in *Now* magazine, and Susanna Egan's essay in *Canadian Literature*. Archer's review raises the issue of the negative representations of Skwarok, or the failure of other reviews to mention his name.

<sup>5</sup> A brief notice on the Upfront Entertainment website, viewed on 10 January, 2007 said that 'Stolen Life,' a project in development, will be "a searing dramatic feature based on Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson's award-winning book about Yvonne's gut-wrenching journey as a Cree woman ('Dramatic Programming')."

<sup>6</sup> It is important to understand the severity of Johnson's speech impairment throughout her childhood, and her gaining the ability to speak with clarity only after extensive surgery during her teenage years. Yvonne Johnson explains: "My basic problem was the way I was born; in the centre of my face, where my nose, top lip, gums, and roof of my mouth should have been, there was only folded tissue that left a gap in my upper mouth. Even my teeth and inner-mouth bones were affected by this severe deformity" (29). Johnson comments repeatedly through the early chapters of her book on the extent of her inability to communicate: "Until Perry came along in 1966, I was the youngest, and unable to talk. In a way my eyes became my voice. I cried to make someone understand with my tears" (34). Although she had operations when she was a child, her impairment was not corrected fully until she was a teenager. When she was sixteen, Johnson came before the courts in Butte Montana, charged with "driving a car without the owner's consent" (130). The owner had died of hypothermia after Johnson and another man had abandoned him on a country road at night during a snowstorm. The judge, unable to hear Johnson as she attempted to speak to the court, realised the severity of her impairment and, as part of Johnson's sentence, ordered she receive plastic surgery and dental work. Johnson comments: "And the radical surgery worked, the doctor knew how to do it all, exactly. [...] Judge Olson ordered the dentists and that incredible doctor at State expense to work on me all that time; no one but a rock star or a millionaire could have afforded it. The surgeon was so proud of me and his architecture, six hundred and seventy-six stitches! At last, I could speak" (133). Included in the final pages of the book is an excerpt from a letter from Johnson to Wiebe in which Johnson writes: "A bear always has a fold in her upper lip. My grandma, I, my eldest child, have the gift and the legacy of the bear so strong, we have the Bear's Lip" (436). In claiming her cleft palate as 'the legacy of the bear,' Johnson establishes cohesion between her childhood inability to speak and her claim now to speak and to identify as Medicine Bear Woman, as will be discussed later in this article.

<sup>7</sup> All references in this article to interviews with Wiebe and Johnson refer to the interviews which follow in this same issue of *Kunapipi*.

<sup>8</sup> Deena Rymhs claims that this confession is "a pivotal moment for the narrative since it is not collaborative" (2-005: 98). I agree that it is pivotal, a point which is essential to my argument as well. I take issue, however, with the claim that it is not collaborative. The confessional narrative is, in effect, the culmination of the long process of collaboration, not only with Wiebe, but with the First Nations Elders who have facilitated Johnson's engagement with Cree spirituality, and one of whom witnesses her spoken confession. These key pages are deeply collaborative in the sense that Johnson was unable to reach this point – the ability to provide the details of the violence that led to Skwarok's death – without the long process of collaboration and the assistance of others.

<sup>9</sup> This passage on the names scratched onto the prison wall, and the significance of the phrase, 'all my relations' is discussed in detail in Claire Omhové's "The Authorisation of Story in Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson's *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman*," *International Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue internationale d'études canadiennes* 29 (2004): 141-159.

<sup>10</sup> Yvonne Johnson in our interview commented on the new cover to the paperback, which does not include her spiritual colours.